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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH POLITICAL PARTIES UNVEIL ELECTION  
PLATFORMS

SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) Bangladesh's political parties pledged to tackle poverty, corruption and poor governance, and the nation's energy crisis as part of their election platforms, which were released over the weekend. The election manifestos of the two main parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), contained many similarities; some local experts learned that certain measures from the BNP platform, released a day after the Awami League's, were lifted directly from the AL manifesto. Both parties placed greater emphasis than previously on addressing corruption, improving governance and working with opponents in Parliament. That said, many here remain skeptical of the parties' commitment to their platforms, participating with respect to political reform measures and to ambitious economic proposals.

AWAMI LEAGUE: CHARTER FOR CHANGE  
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¶2. (SBU) Awami League President and former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina presented her party's manifesto December 12, calling it a "Charter for Change." (NOTE: Many observers noted the slogan's similarity to President-elect Obama's campaign slogan. END NOTE.) The manifesto identified five priority issues:

- maintaining economic stability and controlling inflation;
- moving effectively against corruption;
- addressing power and energy shortfalls;
- eliminating poverty and "inequity," and,
- establishing good governance.

As part of these priorities, Sheikh Hasina vowed to reduce prices, strengthen the Anti-Corruption Commission, double power production in five years, lift 20 million people out of poverty, and control terrorism and religious extremism. She also spoke of strengthening Parliament, making members of Parliament more accountable to constituents and permitting greater dissent.

¶3. (SBU) Despite these statements favoring political reform, the manifesto and Sheikh Hasina's speech painted the BNP and its ally, the Jamaat-e-Islami, as the root causes of Bangladesh's problems. Hasina attacked the BNP-Jamaat alliance, accusing it of abusing power, systematically violating human rights, looting national resources, and running the economy into the ground. On a positive note, Hasina made a direct appeal to Bangladesh's youth and new voters, promising employment to at least one young person in every Bangladeshi family and vowing to build a brighter future for the "young generation." Local observers noted

that the pointed appeal to youth and newly-registered voters was a new tactic on the part of a Bangladeshi political party, traditionally, the parties here have relied on mobilizing their traditional base of voters.

BNP: SAVE THE COUNTRY, SAVE THE PEOPLE  
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14. (SBU) Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Chairperson and former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia unveiled her party's manifesto December 13, a day after the Awami League released its platform. The BNP's slogan is "Save the Country, Save the People." We asked one high-ranking BNP official what was the BNP saving the country and people from? According to that official, the answer is, "Poverty." Many of the BNP manifesto's priorities were identical to those of the Awami League, including curbing inflation, strengthening the Anti-Corruption Commission, combating terrorism and ensuring a job for at least one person in every Bangladeshi family.

15. (SBU) The BNP manifesto included measures aimed at creating a more responsible political system in Bangladesh, including a stronger Parliament where the opposition political party would play a more constructive role. As a means of achieving this, the BNP manifesto proposed naming a member of the opposition the Deputy Speaker of Parliament. While this proposal did not show up in the Awami League's manifesto, media and local observers noted this idea originated with the Awami League. In its manifesto, the BNP refrained from attacking its arch-rival, the Awami League, but the BNP did lay blame for Bangladesh's problems at the

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feet of the current Caretaker Government. Though it did not provide specifics, the BNP manifesto pledged to reform the constitutionally-mandated caretaker government mechanism.

JATIYA AND JAMAAT ALSO RELEASE MANIFESTOS  
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16. (SBU) The Awami League's and BNP's main political partners - the Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami, respectively - also released their manifestos over the weekend. Both Jatiya and Jamaat included measures to protect the poor and ensure food security in their platforms. All four political parties vowed to protect Islam in some fashion. Jamaat, as well as the Jatiya Party, proposed the introduction of a blasphemy law. The Awami League and BNP focused on preventing religious extremism. In her speech unveiling the AL manifesto Sheikh Hasina noted Bangladesh's solidarity with the Muslim world and her commitment to working with the member nations of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

REACTIONS MIXED  
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17. (SBU) Local observers welcomed the manifestos, but noted that the exercise was largely academic since the parties would be quick to change their stance on any issue as needed. One businessman claimed that if the Awami League implemented all the measures outlined in its manifesto, it would cost Bangladesh close to \$200 billion. The manifesto's promises exceeded the capacity of a poor country like Bangladesh, with a GDP of \$70 billion a year, the businessman said. For its part, the BNP included measures in its manifesto that it promised to implement when it came to power in 2001, but did not. One of these recycled promises was the abolition of the Special Powers Act, which critics claim various governments have used to suppress political opposition.

COMMENT  
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18. (SBU) The Awami League and BNP manifestos, and their similarity to each other, cast into sharp relief the fact that the rivalry between the two main political parties is

based on personality, not policy differences. While the educated classes of Bangladesh are likely to be aware of the platforms, the poor are not, and politicians traditionally do not use or refer to the manifestos while campaigning.

19. (SBU) The presentation of the manifestos also reflected the state of organization within the parties. The Awami League event December 12 was preceded by printed invitations in English and Bangla. The AL distributed printed and electronic English versions of the manifesto and Sheikh Hasina's speech. After Sheikh Hasina presented the manifesto, AL handlers invited diplomats and business representatives to have tea with the former Prime Minister. In contrast, the BNP event was poorly organized. Notification of the event came through the media and word of mouth. Neither Begum Zia's speech nor the manifesto itself was available in English. While the Awami League has a reputation for being more organized than the BNP during events like this, the BNP's late commitment to participate in the December 29 elections appears to have added to the confusion.

MORIARTY